

Touch: An Interview with Morton Feldman, Buffalo, New York, May 20, 1985 by Michael Auping

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Michael Auping: You knew Guston.

Morton Feldman: Very well. I knew many of them [the Abstract Expressionists].

MA: Why don't we start with Guston. How well did you know him, and what role do you feel his paintings played in the 1950s?

MF: We were together all the time in those days. I was around his studio all the time. We'd talk, he'd paint, we'd go to the deli, he'd come back to paint, I'd watch.

MA: What was his process like? Did he paint those fifties abstractions quickly?

MF: He wasn't quick. He could be, but he wasn't generally. He painted very carefully. He considered every stroke like it could be his last one. He understood color as well as anyone, even when he wasn't using a lot of color, especially when he wasn't using a lot of color. He could use colors that no one else could use.

MA: Like what?

MF: Orange, green, pink, rose, purple. Not what you'd expect from one of those guys.

MA: Not your macho palette. You wouldn't want to come strolling into the Cedar Bar wearing clothes that color.

MF: *[laughing]* Not on your life. But Phil made them [the colors] tough. His colors made you think about color and what happens when it is put in different situations. But his real gift was his touch. He was so careful about how much paint he put on the brush and how much pressure he applied when he put it to the canvas. I loved watching him do it. There is this relationship – applying paint could be like touching the keys to a piano. You can strike softly and go long, or strike sharply and quick. Pollock and de Kooning were quick – Guston and Rothko soft, elegant, and long. My music is soft and long. That's how I thought Phil painted.

MA: Was Guston interested in your music?

MF: He said he was, but who knows....

MA: Let's talk about some of the artists who didn't seem to demonstrate a brushstroke – Rothko, Newman, Reinhardt, that group. What was your relation to those artists?

MF: I knew Rothko very well.... He is someone who loved music. He didn't know as much about it as he thought he did, but damn well understood it. He understood the space of music....

MA: How would you describe the space of music in relation to the space of painting?

MF: Well, the notes are one thing, but the spaces between the notes, that's where the music takes place. It's the same with painting. What's important is everything that isn't what you think you are seeing. The great thing about painting is seeing things that you think are not there.

MA: I'm not sure I know what you mean. Do you mean like exposing the bare canvas?

MF: Not even that. A completely different space. They were creating a new philosophy of painting in the fifties. Some of us were doing the same in music. It was a different approach to space. To understand the compositions that were being developed – both on the canvas and on the sheet – you needed to think about space and time.

MA: Do you think that avant-garde painting at that time was influenced by avant-garde music?

MF: Could be. I was more interested in what was going on in painting than I was in what most of my music friends were doing. But there were some exceptions. What is true is that painting got a lot more attention than avant-garde music did. But I always suspected that the painters were secretly envious of music, the same way I was envious of painting.

MA: Why? Why do you think they were envious of music?

MF: They understood the abstract nature of music. Historically music is more naturally abstract than painting, even though you may have what we will call your orchestral illustrators that make sounds like a train or a coyote being hit by an anvil.

MA: The orchestras behind cartoons.

MF: Yeah. That's what happens when you stop thinking about music and you just play for other people or you play what the lowest common denominator wants to hear. When that happens in painting, you make Hallmark cards. When it happens in music, you go to Hollywood.... Like I said before, it had to do with creating a new kind of space. In music that meant pushing tones, octaves, sounds out to the edge, to the periphery.

MA: The periphery of what?

MF: Maybe human audibility.

MA: You mean you couldn't literally hear it?

MF: In some cases. But also to the point where you couldn't count it, couldn't count with it, probably what you would think of as not having a beat. You couldn't hear the structure. There was no narrative, no beginning, no end – a completely open and indefinable structure.

MA: Your pieces are often very, very long. Are you talking about duration?

MF: Partly, but not for its own sake. Otherwise the world would be filled with very bad, long songs. You could say, however, that when you stretch music you enter a similar condition as when you stretch the size of an abstract painting. You create a kind of suspension, a space that is too big to comprehend. You can call it "the sublime" if you want to. I think it's just the human mind set adrift. It's about being alone with sensation and time. That's all it is. That should be enough. Like Philip [Guston] said, "Make more than what you know."